

STRUCTURE, MYTH, AND PARODY: BERNARD MALAMUD'S TREATMENT OF THE DIAMOND IN THE NATURAL

Arvindra Sant

Bernard Malamud's treatment of myth in his fiction has analogues to its use by other modern writers, for example, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. Most importantly, the myth for Malamud functions as parody with a serious underlying motif. Whereas Joyce employs the framework of myth to endow the ordinary life of Leopold Bloom with mythic overtones, and Eliot employs a network of mythic allusions to reinforce ties between past and present, Malamud employs myth in the eighteenth-century mock-heroic or parodistic mode. The use of myth in Malamud's novel, The Natural, also establishes a close link between its framework and theme: the modern world of baseball, around which the structure of the novel revolves, contains within it the epic dimensions of Homeric battles and the mythical elements of the Arthurian quest for the Grail. This uniquely layered structure of The Natural is emphasized through the use of relevant imagery and symbolism that reiterates the connection between Roy Hobbs, the modern-day Perceval, and his legendary counterpart. Although critics like Wasserman, Podhoretz, and Mellard have discussed the mythical allusions in the novel at great length, they have overlooked the wealth of irony that underscores this comparison between Hobbs and the Arthurian Perceval. ⁽¹⁾ Like Sir Perceval, Roy is questing for the ultimate (each is pursuing his Grail), but this quest motif attains ironic dimensions as the corruption of Roy Hobbs becomes increasingly apparent in the narrative. The predominant element of myth in the novel is thus enriched by the blending of the realistic and the mythic, the latter at times being distorted to accommodate the inherent weakness amidst heroic aspiration of the hero, Hobbs.

The mythical pattern of the Waste Land, strongly delineated in The Natural, has been discussed at length in Malamud criticism. Malamud clearly names his hero "Roy" (King) to increase the ironic gap between the "noble" role assigned him in the novel and the legendary figure he is modeled on. This supra-structure of myth within myth (the Arthurian legend containing within it the modern American myth of baseball) multi-layers both form and theme, and makes the implications of the tainted quest motif a constant source of double meanings throughout the novel. Right from the introductory paragraph of The Natural, we see Roy Hobb's eager face peering out of the train window, marking the initial stage of his quest for success which will, however, involve a few major setbacks. ⁽²⁾ Unlike the loyal white steed of the Perceval legend, Roy is journeying on an iron horse, as symbolized by the train. Presumably he has greater powers available to him, but more limited capabilities within him.

The undertone of mock-heroism is also perceived in the structural pattern of the novel, which, in keeping with the predominant theme of baseball, follows the pattern of the major, yet largely overlooked symbols in the novel. The diamond here is obviously one of the forms the Grail takes. The quest for success can be perceived through the movement of the protagonist from one point or base of the diamond to another. The diamond as Grail signifies the movement back to homeplate and hence, marks Roy's progress toward Ultimate Truth.